DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 235 214 TM 830 634

AUTHOR Edwards, John; McCombie, Randy
TITLE The Effects of Positivity and Personalism of Attitude Scale Statements on Agreement Ratings.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (Chicago, IL, May, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Higher Education; *Response Style (Tests); *Semantic Differential; Test Construction; Test Format; Testing Problems; *Test Items
IDENTIFIERS *Personalism; *Positive Wording

ABSTRACT

The major purpose of the three studies reported here was to investigate possible differences in agreement/disagreement with attitude statements as a function of their type (with regard to positivity/negativity) and personalism. In the first study, 90 students completed scales on energy conservation and on having good study habits. Agreement varied considerably as a function of item type, but the rank order of agreement ratings was not consistent across the personalism factor. In the second study, 100 students completed scales on energy conservation and on regular exercise. Agreement varied considerably across item type, and the rank order of mean agreement was very consistent over the personalism factor. In the third study, 80 students completed scales on energy conservation and on regular exercise. The findings resembled those of the second study. When combined over the three studies, there is strong and consistent evidence that people give more extreme ratings to "negative" than to "positive" items. Item personalism had no consistent effect on agreement ratings. (BW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED235214

The Effects of Positivity and Personalism of Attitude Scale Statements on Agreement Ratings

John Edwards & Randy McCombie

Loyola University of Chicago

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. D. Edwards

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association Convention, Chicago, May, 1983.

TM 830 635

Background

Constructing scales to measure self-reported attitudes and other dispositions is a task frequently faced by social researchers. Although many techniques are available for refining scales, there is little guidance for perhaps the most difficult stage of test construction -- writing the items. This paper presents a theoretically based system for writing attitude scale items, and reports the results of three experiments on some of the psychometric properties of items written according to the system.

Attitudes are sometimes conceptually defined and most often operationally defined as the totality of beliefs about an attitude object. Probably the most common type of "belief statement" used to measure attitudes is one which has three components: (1) the attitude object which is (2) linked in some way to (3) an attribute or consequence that has evaluative implications. In the simplest case, these three components can each be expressed in "positive" or "negative" terms; this yields 2^3 or eight basically different types of statements (see accompanying table).

According to extensions of Heider's balance theory, a statement for which the product of the "signs" of its three components is positive, is a balanced statement that says something positive about the attitude object. When the product is negative, the statement is imbalanced and says something negative about the object. Extensions of balance theory as well as empirical work on social judgment suggest that certain psychological responses such as agreement/disagreement with a statement may be affected by its structure. Other lines of research on social perception imply that positive and negative affective reactions are not symmetrical. For example, a person who has a bad trait may be seen as more"bad" than a person who has a good trait is seen as "good" -- even if the bad and good traits are antonyms.

Still other derivations from balance theory suggest that statements about objects that are personalized (e.g., by including personal pronouns) might be judged differently than otherwise similar but impersonal statements. An inspection of 25 attitude scales in the public domain revealed that none contained all personal items, and 16 contained all impersonal items. In the nine remaining cases containing a mixture of both, there were too few personal items to draw any comparisons, e.g., about differences in judged favorability. The same inspection of existing scales also revealed that item types 1 and 2 (see accompanying table) are the most frequently used; the other six possible types are rather rare.

The major purpose of the three studies reported here was to investigate possible differences in agreement/disagreement with attitude statements as a function of their type (particularly with regard to positivity/negativity) and personalism. As a set, the studies were designed to also determine if any such effects depended on having scales that are homogeneous with respect to personalism and on controlling for the meaning of the attributes.

Examples of the Eight Types of Statements
in Personal and Impersonal Forms

	Type			
	Object	Link	Attribute	
1.	+	+	+	P: My engaging in regular exercise would lead me to living longer. I: Engaging in regular exercise leads to living longer.
2.	+	+	-	P: My participating in a regular exercise program would result in my being looked down upon by others. I: Participating in a regular exercise program results in being looked down upon by others.
3.	+	-	+	P: My exercising every day would stand in the way of making effective use of my time. I: Exercising every day stands in the way of making effective use of time.
4.	+	-	-	P: My exercising regularly would keep me from getting heart disease. I: Exercising regularly keeps people from getting heart disease.
5.	-	+	+	P: My avoiding daily exercise would bring about a good state of health for me. I: Avoiding daily exercise brings about a good state of health.
6.	-	+	-	P: My lack of exercise would cause me to be overweight. I: A lack of exercise causes being overweight.
7.	-	-	+	P: Without regular exercise, I would lose my ability to relax. I: Without regular exercise, one loses the ability to relax.
8.	-	-	-	P: I could prevent being irritable by my not having to exercise on a regular basis. I: People can prevent being irritable by not having to exercise on a regular basis.

Note: The plus and minus signs indicate whether the attitude object, verbal linkage and evaluative attribute are construed in positive or negative terms, regardless of where they appear in a statement.

Study 1. Ninety students completed two 32-item scales, one on energy conservation and one on having good study habits. Each scale contained two sets of 16 items (one personal and one impersonal item of each type) in random order. The attributes were different for each item.

Mean Agreement Ratings*

Item	Conserving Energy		Study Habits	
Type	Pers.	Impers.	Pers.	Impers.
1	4.96	4.89	4.46	4.83
2	5.37	4.43	4.83	4.72
3	5.32	5.29	4.56	2.99
4.	3.37	4.08	3.79	4.13
5	4.49	5.49	3.72	5.29
6	5.43	4.67	4.60	3.08
7	3.67	4.81	3.61	4.11
8	4.52	4.03	5.13	3.34

Agreement varied considerably as a function of item type, but the rank order of agreement ratings was not consistent across the personalism factor, ie., the personal items receiving higher ratings were not the same as the impersonal items that received higher ratings. However, in general, the four "negative" item types (2, 3, 5, and 8) obtained somewhat more extreme ratings than did the four "positive" item types (1, 4, 6 and 7).

Personal items obtained slightly higher ratings than impersonal ones on the study habits issue, but for energy conservation there was no difference.

The interaction between item type and personalism was such that personal items obtained somewhat more extreme ratings on some types (2, 3, 6 and 8), but less extreme ratings on other types (4, 5 and 7) than impersonal items.

These patterns were not fully consistent for both issues or for the two sets or replications of items used in both issues.

*Agreement ratings were made on a 1 to 7 scale; theoretically negative items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicate greater favorability toward the attitude object for all items.

Study 2. One hundred students completed two-8-item scales, one on energy conservation and the other on regular exercise. Each scale contained one item of each of the eight types and, for a particular scale, the items were either all personal or all impersonal. There were four versions of each scale created by counterbalancing which attribute appeared in a given type. Thus, in combining over versions, attribute content was "controlled" by counterbalancing. Each respondent completed only a personal scale for one issue and an impersonal scale for the other, so each scale was rated by 12 to 14 people.

Mean Agreement Ratings*

	Conserving Energy		Regular Exercise	
	Pers.	Impers.	Pers.	Impers.
1.	4.76	5.22	5.76	6.16
2.	5.45	5.55	5.98	6.35
3.	5.51	5.43	5.88	5.67
4.	3.88	4.24	4.78	4.78
5.	5.53	6.12	6.16	6.07
6.	4.02	4.53	4.12	4.58
7.	3.82	4.10	4.63	3.94
8.	5.31	5.16	5.90	5.27

Agreement varied considerably across the eight item types, and the rank order of mean agreement was very consistent over the personalism factor for the various issues and scale versions, i.e., the item types obtaining higher ratings for the personal items also obtained higher ratings for the impersonal ones. Items that said something negative about the attitude objects received more extreme ratings than did the positive items although the size of this difference was not the same for all issues and scale versions.

There was no overall effect of item personalism, ratings of personal items were slightly lower than impersonal ones on the energy issue, but for exercise the difference tended in the opposite way.

The interaction between item type and personalism was such that personal items received higher ratings than impersonal ones for some types (most consistently for types 3 and 8), and less extreme ratings for other types (most consistently types 1, 2 and 6)

These findings were not fully consistent in size for all issues and scale versions.

*Agreement ratings were made on a 1 to 7 scale; theoretically negative items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicate greater favorability toward the attitude object for all items.

Study 3. Eighty students completed two 8-item scales, one on energy conservation and the other on regular exercise. Each scale contained one item of each of the eight basis types; four of the items were personal and four were impersonal. There were four verions of each scale for both issues created by counterbalancing which attribute appeared in a given type and by counterbalancing whether a given type of item was personal or impersonal. Each respondent completed only one version of a scale on each issue, so that each scale was rated by 20 people.

Mean Agreement Ratings*

	Conserving Energy		Regular Exercise	
	Pers.	Impers.	Pers.	Impers.
1.	4.55	4.28	5.92	6.10
2.	5.95	5.30	6.25	6.48
3.	5.88	5.95	6.15	6.58
4.	4.10	5.02	4.25	4.22
5.	5.02	5.12	6.15	6.30
6.	3.50	4.48	4.05	4.60
7.	3.85	3.55	4.28	4.30
8.	5.90	6.00	5.88	6.18

Agreement varied considerably across the eight item types, and the rank order of mean agreement was very consistent over the personalism factor as in Study 2. And, as in Studies 1 and 2, negative items obtained much more extreme ratings than did positive ones.

Personal items received somewhat lower ratings than impersonal ones for both issues, but this difference was only marginally significant for exercise and not significant for energy.

Item type and personalism tended to interact in that personal items obtained somewhat higher ratings for some types (1, 2 and 7), but lower ratings for other types (3.4, 5, 6 and 8). This interaction was significant for energy but not exercise.

As in Studies 1 and 2, significant interactions involving replications or versions of a scale reveal that the effects of item type, personalism or their interaction is not always of the same form or degree.

*Agreement ratings were made on a 1 to 7 scale; theoretically negative items were reverse scored so that higher scores indicate greater favorability toward the attitude object for all items.

General conclusions and implications

When combined over the three studies, there is strong and consistent evidence that people give more extreme ratings to "negative" than to "positive" items. This difference averages about 1.5 points on a 7 point scale. Further, it seems clear that not all positive or all negative items are judged alike. For example, in general type 1 items received higher ratings than type 7 items. Keeping in mind that the attitude objects, as defined in these studies in their positive "states," were also socially desirable (e.g., conserving energy), and also noting that whether one defines an object or its opposite as "the object" is rather arbitrary, it follows that future studies might produce a reversal of the present findings -- especially with socially undesirable objects (e.g., smoking). Thus, the general principle may be that it is not "positive" and "negative" items, per se, that differ in the extremeness of the ratings they elicit, but that we disagree more with disagreeable statements than we agree with agreeable ones.

Surprisingly, item personalism had no consistent effect on agreement ratings regardless of whether a scale contained only personal or only impersonal items (Study 2) or a mixture of both (Studies 1 and 3). Among the many possible reasons for this lack of effect may be that some people "personalize" impersonal statements or "depersonalize" the personal ones. In any event, the personalism factor warrants further research, e.g., on whether it affects correlations of attitudes with other variables such as behavior.

Personalism tended to interact with item type, although this effect was not very consistent or strong. Combining over the three studies personally phrased items tended to receive more extreme ratings than impersonal ones for three of the four "negative" types (2, 3 and 8), while they received lower ratings for all the positive types. Perhaps the aforementioned tendency to disagree more with items one disagrees with than to agree with items one agrees with may be enhanced by item personalism because of ego involvement biases.

The procedure for counterbalancing attribute content sometimes resulted in statements that were complex, implausible or had other features that may have affected agreement judgments. This accounts for the interaction effects of scale versions with item type and personalism. Thus, the specific content of an item, as distinct from its structural features defined by balance theory, also influences how it is judged. It should also be noted that other types of statements that do not fit neatly into the present typology might be quite legitimate indicators of attitudes. Even so, it is suggested that attitude scale contructors consider the wide possible variations in item structure and content provided by the system and findings reported here when writing items.

The variety of statements that can be made about objects has implications for other kinds of attitude research. For example, in trying to "sell" an object, which of the four types of positive statements is more persuasive? We are currently investigating this and related questions.